

Tillerson, in Alaska, Gives No Hint on Paris Climate Accord

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Highlight: At a meeting of the Arctic Council, the secretary of state was noncommittal when asked about the administration's view on the landmark climate agreement.

Body

FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson said on Thursday that the United States would “continue to be vigilant” in protecting the Arctic, a region that is undergoing rapid change linked to global warming. But he gave no signal as to whether his government would remain in the Paris climate accord, the international agreement that would go furthest in ensuring that protection.

Mr. Tillerson, speaking at a meeting of the Arctic Council that marked the end of the United States' two-year chairmanship of the intergovernmental organization, reaffirmed that the United States would stay involved in Arctic issues, including safeguarding what he termed the region's “fragile environment.”

He also signed, along with his counterparts from Russia, Canada and the five other nations with Arctic territory, a closing statement that mentioned the impacts of climate change on the region and took note of the Paris agreement.

But Mr. Tillerson was noncommittal in addressing the Trump administration's views on the Paris accord, in which the United States and most other nations have pledged to reduce carbon emissions with a goal of keeping global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius.

The question of whether to leave the Paris deal is the subject of much debate within the White House, with meetings between proponents of each side having been postponed several times. Mr. Tillerson has said he supports remaining in the agreement.

No decision is imminent, and in his remarks on Thursday, Mr. Tillerson presented the delay as necessary to gain the viewpoints of parties outside the White House and even outside the United States, including the other Arctic nations.

“We are taking time to understand your concerns,” he told the members of the council. “But we're not going to rush. We're going to work to make the right decision for the United States.”

The remarks reflected the delicate situation that Mr. Tillerson found himself in with the Arctic Council, which has considered climate change a major issue throughout its 20-year existence and especially in the last two years of the Obama administration's chairmanship. But Mr. Tillerson represents a new administration whose leader, President Trump, has called climate change a hoax.

Officials from other Arctic nations seemed relieved that the statements from Mr. Tillerson were not more severe.

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"I think there were a lot of fears and concerns before we got here," Margot Wallstrom, the Swedish foreign minister, said in an interview. "A worst-case scenario could have been that they would have declared at this meeting that they would leave the Paris agreement."

Ms. Wallstrom said she had asked Mr. Tillerson about the Paris accord at dinner on Wednesday. She said he responded by saying that the administration had concluded that it needed to establish what its climate policy should be before deciding on Paris.

Other officials said the Trump administration's eventual decision on the accord would matter more than what Mr. Tillerson said here.

"What we're really waiting for is the U.S. decision on what they will do regarding the Paris agreement," said Rene Soderman, the senior Arctic official for Finland, which has taken over the rotating chairmanship of the council. "Not only we but, I think, every signatory of the Paris agreement is waiting for that."

The council members approved, with little fuss, an agreement on scientific cooperation in the region. But the meeting's closing statement, known as the Fairbanks Declaration, had been the subject of a flurry of last-minute negotiations on Wednesday.

"We came here to Fairbanks believing that the declaration language was agreed," Mr. Soderman said. But the United States objected to some of the language on climate change and other issues.

Mr. Soderman said the American negotiators had been flexible. "We were able to push the U.S. back as much as possible," Mr. Soderman said, "and they were able to go back as much as possible."

"It's a decent declaration and contains all the essential issues for all the eight countries," he said.

In his speech, Mr. Tillerson pledged that the United States would remain committed to the work of the council. Observers said it was not clear precisely to what degree the United States would stay engaged, but they hailed the government's apparent flexibility.

"What we know is that the attitude of the U.S. is very constructive," said Aleksi Harkonen, another Finnish Foreign Ministry official. "They are ready for compromises, and they will play along."

"Maybe they will not be as active as they used to be, but they will not obstruct others," he said.

Before the meeting began — with drumming from indigenous groups that have representation in the organization — Mr. Tillerson, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov of Russia and others visited with representatives of the council's various working groups, which study issues like oil spill response, sustainable development, biodiversity and environmental changes.

Stopping for some candy at a table of the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment working group, Mr. Tillerson thanked the group for its efforts. "And there's more to come," he said. "You didn't solve it all."

Mr. Tillerson arrived in Fairbanks on Wednesday after talks earlier in the day in Washington with Mr. Lavrov. Before the dinner with Mr. Lavrov, Ms. Wallstrom and the other foreign ministers, he attended a reception at a cultural center along the Chena River in Fairbanks. A group of about 100 activists protested outside, chanting anti-Tillerson slogans.

Terry Chapin, a climate scientist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who was among the protesters, said they were there to encourage the council to take stronger action to combat climate change in the region.

"They're constrained in the action they can take because they depend on the consensus from participating countries," he said. "So if the United States is not going to provide consensus on the climate action that's needed, their hands are tied."

"I think we really need to speak to people like Tillerson to say that this is the kind of action that's needed."

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PHOTO: Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson at the plenary session of the Arctic Council meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Thursday. (PHOTOGRAPH BY NICHOLAS KAMM/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES)

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